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DAWN R. GILPIN AND LESLIE-JEAN THORNTON

Arizona State University

Libtard gungrabbers and #PewPewLife: Multiple realities in a political issue-centric forum

Keywords

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Abstract

The image-sharing social media platform Instagram has become a site for political discourse that combines visual and textual elements. These political conversations often take place in the form of memes or popular graphic sentiments intended for redistribution. Scholars have identified memes as markers of subcultural knowledge that may be used to reinforce beliefs and norms, define social boundaries and disparage outgroups. Gun rights activism in the United States has intensified in an increasingly partisan environment. We examined memes shared via Instagram to popular gun culture hashtags between June 2016 and February 2018. Insofar as memes act as vehicles for subcultural beliefs and values, here they may be seen as representing multiple realities from the perspective of Second Amendment enthusiasts: descriptions of their perceived reality, justifying the need for guns and conservative political positions; the construed reality of what the meme

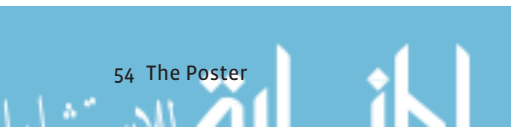
creators and sharers believe to be liberal attitudes; and the aspirational reality of a world that offers unobstructed support for their priorities. In other words, these memes can collectively be said to represent both the truth about the world, as seen by these users, and cultural messages to set power differentials and identity boundaries with Others.

The slur 'libtard' is representative of an attitude of social distancing among certain American conservatives in the vein of right-wing radio host Michael Savage's book *Liberalism is a Mental Disorder* (2005). Political and cultural polarization in the United States has been the object of intense study by social scientists in recent years, with mixed findings. Some scholars have found that Americans are less divided among issue positions than is commonly perceived, a condition referred to as 'false polarization' (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016). The role of online interaction in real or perceived polarization also remains unclear (O'Hara and Stevens 2015). However, a 2014 Pew Research Center study found evidence that Americans are increasingly tribal in their partisan affiliations, with strong animosity towards members of other parties. One way in which this growing social distance manifests is through the rise in stereotyped views of those of opposing political views (Iyengar et al. 2012). Exploring the attitudes of issue activists through their visual social media posts may provide insight into the degree to which they reflect similar patterns of polarization in their social identity.

US gun culture and the Second Amendment

The Second Amendment to the United States Constitution is part of the Bill of Rights, which lays out specific affordances not detailed in the primary document. In particular, this amendment states, in its entirety: 'A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed' (Cornell Law School, Legal Information Institute n.d.).

For much of the country's history, the courts privileged the first clause of the Amendment, setting limitations on individual rights. Beginning with the Civil Rights Movement in the 1970s, however, interest groups such as the National Rifle Association began agitating for loosening regulations and considering the individual right to bear arms to be a fundamental entitlement encoded in the Constitution (Collins 2014; Winkler 2011). Today, Second Amendment activists are pressing for the elimination of all restrictions and establishing national licensing reciprocity. If instituted, reciprocity would essentially codify so-called 'constitutional carry', or the right to carry a concealed weapon without need for a permit, in all states (NRA-ILA 2017). For these citizens, any effort to regulate firearms is an illegitimate attempt to curtail their constitutional rights. Laura Collins argued that 'demands for an unbridled Second Amendment may be more rooted in identity work (or the



performance of a demanding subject) than in the desire to satisfy those demands' (2014: 742). For many of these issue advocates, then, gun ownership has become an identity characteristic akin to religion or ethnicity, and a key aspect of their self-presentation. As a site for self-presentation and negotiation of social identities (Manovich 2017; Zappavigna 2016), Instagram seems to be an appropriate domain for researching Second Amendment subcultures.

Instagram and cultural (re)production

While social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allow sharing of multimedia content, Instagram has since its inception been focused solely on visual media. It has become one of the largest mobile image-sharing platforms in the world (Manovich 2017: 11). Given that it does not technically allow images to be uploaded from the web or other sources, Manovich describes Instagram as 'the most *pure* visual medium we have today from theoretical and research perspectives' (2017: 12, original emphasis).

However, mobile phones are versatile tools, used for a range of communicative functions. Users can capture images of anything that they are viewing on their screen, from text messages to social media apps, from games to news; once an image is in the phone's camera roll, it can then be uploaded to Instagram like any other image. Services such as Regram also allow users to share images from other Instagram feeds, similar to the retweeting function on Twitter, or reblogging on Tumblr. As a result, Instagram is increasingly also a site of media and news sharing (see Schmidbauer et al. 2018).

Compared to other social media platforms, relatively few scholars have explored the discursive functions of Instagram (Manovich 2017). Yet Instagram represents a tangible manifestation of what Clifford Geertz (1973) referred to as the 'webs of signification' that constitute and reconstitute culture, in this case through visual communication. Connections on Instagram can be made through a virtually infinite number of combinations of user relationships and hashtags.

Within online discourse, memes are popular graphic sentiments intended for redistribution. Limor Shifman notes that 'meme' is a general umbrella term, comprising a variety of 'memetic formats' distinguished by different assortments of formal features (2013: 373). They typically comprise a combination of visual and textual elements, although sometimes they consist solely of text presented as an image. Scholars have identified memes as markers of subcultural knowledge that may be used to reinforce beliefs and norms, define social boundaries and disparage outgroups (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017; Shifman 2013). The processes of creating, manipulating and circulating memes contribute towards establishing shared cultural experiences among social media users (Milner 2013; Shifman 2013).

Memes represent a particular class of discursive power. By uniting the presentational immediacy of images with the denotative quality of text, memes achieve what Jens Kjeldsen refers to as 'symbolic

condensation', a direct emotional and cognitive hit that 'allows for a simultaneous cueing and evoking of a wide range of emotions and trains of thought' (2016: 266). Langdon Winner (1986) famously argued that ideologies are embedded within artefacts of all kinds, and even superficially non-political memes can be seen as having an ideological cast based on their visual and textual elements. Instagram captions and hashtags can add additional complexities of meaning. Furthermore, the polyvocality of memes, which frequently draw upon a rich trove of popular culture references, facilitates diverse engagement and strengthens bonds among those who share them (Milner 2013). Memes are therefore an efficient means of communicating complex messages and reinforcing social identity ties through fast-moving, ephemeral social media platforms such as Instagram.

A cultural approach to media typically rests on James Carey's definition of communication as 'a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed' ([1992] 2009: 19). More expansively, the circuit of culture model (Gay et al. 1997) serves as a reminder that culture is a result of articulations among various moments: production, consumption, regulation, representation and identity. In this view, the processes of content creation, distribution and consumption all serve to construct and perpetuate a given cultural context. In the contemporary environment, social media platforms may be said to perform a regulatory function, as they delineate some of the forms through which these cultural processes may take place.

We therefore set out to investigate the ways in which contributors towards issue-centric gun culture and Second Amendment hashtags use meme sharing on Instagram to construct their individual and collective identities.

Methodologies

For this project, we examined memes shared via Instagram to popular gun culture hashtags. While searches took place between June 2017 and February 2018, Instagram displays posts in reverse chronological order. The ability to see posts predating the search dates allowed greater immersion in, and familiarity with, the culture and its representative images; the earliest post used dates from June 2016. Some of the posts refer explicitly to the Second Amendment or firearms, whereas others refer to 'liberals' or politics more generally. All, however, were shared using one or more hashtags to bring them to the attention of users interested in gun-related issues: #2A, #PewPewLife, #Guns, #NRA or others. Some included additional culturally loaded tags such as #libtard or #gungrabbers. The memes appeared with varying frequency on Instagram and may be found in a variety of online contexts.

The approach throughout this project was immersive and iterative, beginning with frequent scrolls through gun-culture Instagram feeds. During those searches, we saved numerous digital files of images expressing aspects of gun-culture ideology and practice. These were winnowed down to

about 100 of interest; further culling resulted in the fourteen representative memes chosen for deeper analysis and discussed in this article.

To elicit a wide range of meanings from each image, we took a systematic approach to analysis drawing on visual methodologies developed by Lester (2018) and Rose (2016). We also conducted a multimodal semiotic analysis of the entire vernacular of these memes, including the images and any accompanying captions or hashtags.

Multiple interacting realities: An emergent conceptual framework

Through the process of identifying and reinforcing social identities and boundaries between Second Amendment enthusiasts and 'libtard gungrabbers', we found that the circulation of memes via Instagram hashtags serves to establish and represent multiple realities from the perspective of those who post them: perceived, construed and aspirational. *Perceived reality* expresses the current world-view according to gun supporters, which justifies the need for firearms and conservative political positions. *Construed reality* reflects what members of gun culture believe to be liberal positions, beliefs and behaviours, with respect to weapons specifically but also the world in general. Also, memes representing *aspirational reality* imagine a world that offers unobstructed support for the priorities of gun owners. Some memes reflect a singular reality, while others encompass multiple dimensions.

The mutually reinforcing tension between perceived and construed realities reifies cultural and political stances into the meme format, declaring the opinions and values that they contain to be absolute. In a sense, all of the memes serve to construct the aspirational reality: images of perceived reality contain pointers to how one should, according to gun culture, view and interact with the world. The implication is that gun owners and Second Amendment enthusiasts should be the model for all citizens. The construed reality images highlight the ways in which 'gun-grabbers' fall short of this ideal. As a result, there is relatively little need for the aspirational reality to be spelled out explicitly, although a few images do just that.

In the next section, we examine some examples of these realities in greater detail.

Perceived reality: The world as a source of threats to safety and order

The image in Figure 1 offers a clear statement of the gun culture world-view.

The man depicted, identified as 'Lt. Col. Jeff Cooper', developed the modern shooting technique taught at ranges nationwide and which he is demonstrating in the photo: cupping the gun with both hands and sighting along the barrel (McLellan 2006). He is a patriarchal figure with military credentials, both traits that are highly valued in gun culture.

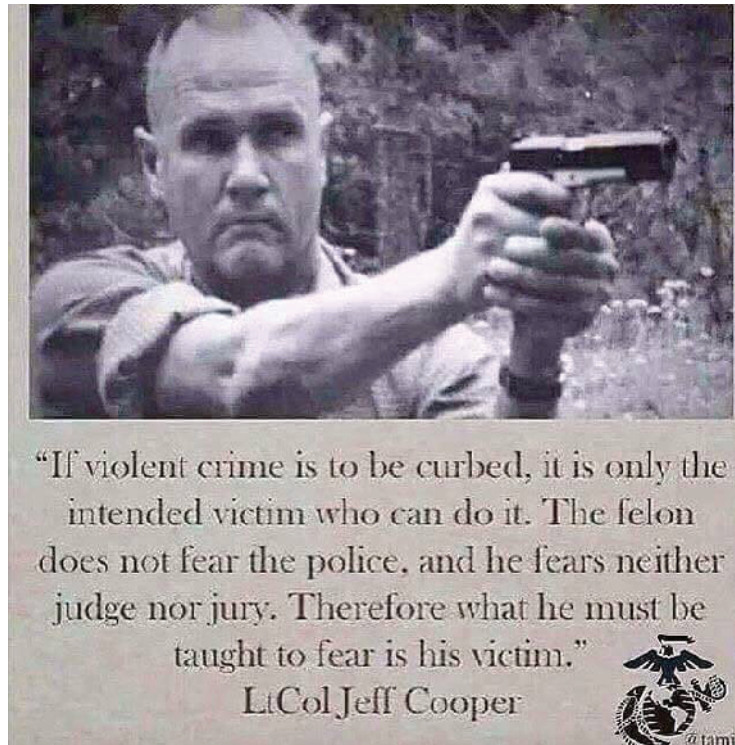


Figure 1: Jeff Cooper is known as the father of the modern technique of handgun shooting, after a career in the US Marine Corps during WWII and the Korean War. The text of this image lays out a fundamental philosophy among members of American gun cultures.

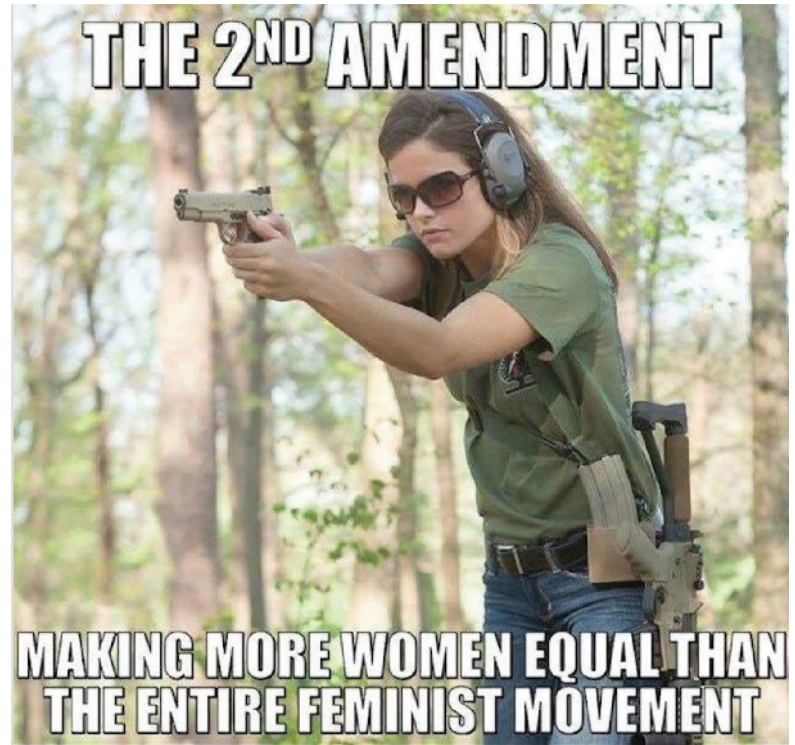


Figure 2: 'Soft' forms of power, such as career advancement or economic inequality, are insignificant according to the gun culture perspective on feminism, which foregrounds personal defense against violence.

The text on this image expresses the fundamental premise that people must prepare themselves for encounters with inevitable violence. Despite the reverence of the Right for law enforcement, this meme clarifies that the ultimate responsibility for safety rests with the individual, the would-be victim. If violent crime is inevitable, and criminals are likely to be armed, the logical conclusion according to this perspective is that only those bearing weapons—and willing to use them – can hope to prevail. Since the criminal ‘must be taught to fear [...] his victim’, we are given to understand that intimidation is power and firearms are the ultimate tool of intimidation.

In the same vein, ‘soft’ forms of power, such as opportunities for career advancement or income equality, are not part of the conservative value system espoused in gun culture. In conservative discourse, the strong, patriarchal man is valorized over the ‘weak’ liberal, as ‘the vigorous defender of the same boundaries of gender, sexuality and nationhood that his liberal counterpart threatens to dissolve’ (Duncan 2017: 517). Liberal feminism is one form of challenge to those boundaries.

The image in Figure 2 reinforces this message, belittling the tenets of the feminist movement and claiming moral superiority: arming women is shown as the true equalizing force.

It is worth noting that this image marks a visual departure from most of the memes posted to these hashtags, which tend to display a neutral palette of blacks, browns, greys and metallic tones, with occasional splashes of red and white. Here instead we have a springtime outdoor setting that highlights the woman’s youth and vitality. The gun, here, is depicted as part of the natural order.

This young woman is not simply posing with a gun. She is using the same modern techniques developed by the aforementioned Jeff Cooper and shown in an active stance. Unlike him, she has donned protective ear- and eyewear, suggesting that she is training rather than facing down an assailant. She is safe because of the pastoral setting, because of her sensible gear and because she is learning to wield firepower in her own defence. The meme argues that the Second Amendment is a natural principle essential to preserving that safety.

See also Figure 3, which echoes both the natural setting and the theme of self-reliance, along with the message that a woman without a gun is destined to be a victim. Since the traditional family unit is valued above all else, loving parents raise their children to be proficient in armed self-defence.

Construed reality: Libtard gungrabbers and their hysterical hypocrisies

Yet another image of a woman represents an introduction to the domain of construed reality, in which users share images that purport to expose weaknesses in the morals, logic or physical constitution of gun rights opponents. Figure 4 shows feminist activist Gloria Steinem wearing a T-shirt that reads ‘I had an abortion’.



Figure 3: In gun culture discourse, a person without a gun—especially a woman—is a victim. Families are responsible for raising their children in a culture of armed self-defense.

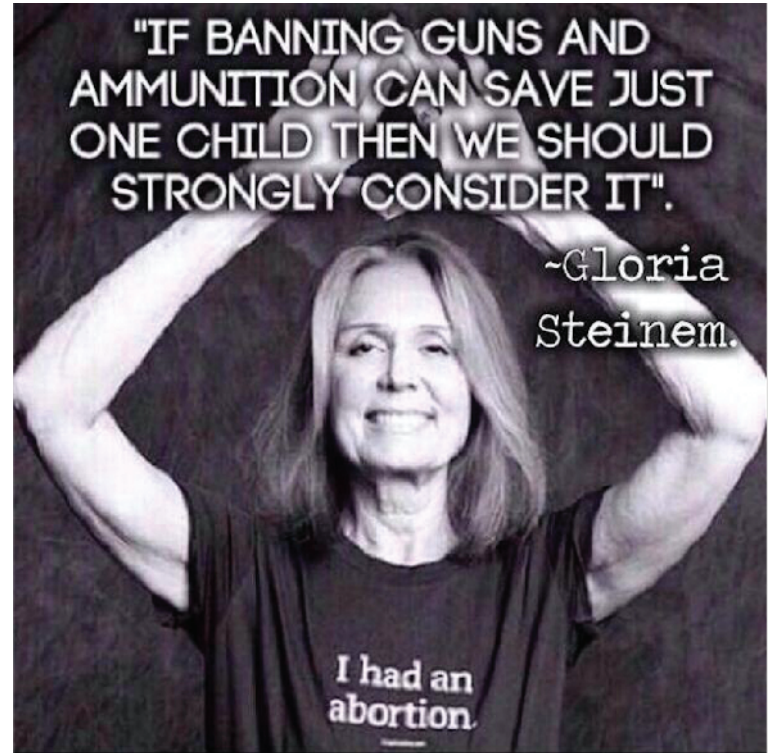


Figure 4: This Gloria Steinem photograph is from a 2004 exhibition that was in turn part of an independent film project by Jennifer Baumgardner and Gillian Aldrich, *I Had An Abortion* (2005). The T-shirt she is wearing was sold by Planned Parenthood as a fundraising item.

The text, attributed to Steinem, makes an argument for gun control on the basis of saving ‘even one child’ and is meant to highlight the hypocrisy of liberals who are opposed to guns but in favour of legal abortion. The contrast between Steinem’s advanced age and the reproductive rights message is especially noticeable in comparison to the fertility themes of Figures 2 and 3. Firearms are consistently represented as a natural element of life and those who speak out against them are sterile or worse.

Like most memes, the quotation here is unsourced, and we have been unable to locate an authoritative source. The suggestion that ‘we should strongly consider’ gun control seems remarkably mild for a ‘strident’ reproductive rights activist, and so it may be a misattribution. In the wake of the October 2017 Las Vegas shooting, another statement comparing gun control and conservative efforts to restrict abortion access was falsely attributed to Steinem:

I want any young men who buy a gun to be treated like young women who seek an abortion. Think about it: a mandatory 48-hours waiting period, written permission from a parent or a judge, a note from a doctor proving that he understands what he is about to do, time spent watching a video on individual and mass murders, traveling hundreds of miles at his own expense to the nearest gun shop, and walking through protesters holding photos of loved ones killed by guns, protesters who call him a murderer.

After all, it makes more sense to do this for young men seeking guns than for young women seeking an abortion. No young woman needing reproductive freedom has ever murdered a roomful of strangers.

(Warner 2017)

The latter example, unsurprisingly, gained little traction among gun enthusiasts on Instagram. However, it illustrates how Steinem has been used as an avatar for the intersection of these two contentious issues across the political spectrum.

Irrespective of the specific quote’s authenticity, the ‘I had an abortion’ meme has been popular on conservative sites for several years as ‘gotcha’ evidence of insincerity among liberal feminists in particular (see *The Right to Bear* 2014). More extreme conspiracists have also seized on Steinem’s upraised arms and the triangle shape made by her touching thumbs and forefingers. Infowars host Alex Jones (2012), for example, denounced Steinem for ‘Making abortion cool while flaunting illuminati symbol’. The need to create deep divisions and ascribe nefarious motives to opponents beyond mere policy disagreements is characteristic of many artefacts of construed reality.

As a case in point, but in reverse, we have the image in Figure 5. This illustration is in the style of a First World War propaganda poster, decrying gun owners as baby-eating monsters. The claim is that gun control advocates demonize those who exercise their constitutional right to bear arms, as evidenced by the crazed, sharp-taloned, toothy beast poised to devour a wailing infant. The threat of violence against gun owners is emphasized in the last line, which urges viewers to ‘join Team Gun Control TODAY, and make those monsters PAY’, punctuated with a bomb.

Several thematic elements make this image of particular interest in exploring reality construction among gun subcultures. First, the use of a vintage wartime format adds layers to the characterization: historical nostalgia and reverence for military personnel are among the core conservative values (Cleen 2018). Evoking them in an image that mocks liberal hysterics also conveys the notion that ‘gun-grabbers’ are unpatriotic, unsupportive of the nation’s history or servicemen.

Second, there is no actual firearm depicted in the illustration. The soldier-beast is wearing a grenade belt, without ammunition or even a holster. Only the text identifies the figure as a gun owner and the purported makers of the poster as ‘Team Gun Control’. The reason for this omission becomes clear upon tracing the origin of the image, which began as a work of fan art for the video game Team Fortress 2 (Sutton 2014). Having already been mistaken by Russian documentary filmmakers as an authentic piece of historical propaganda, it has been manipulated here to refer to gun owners and opponents. What this detail underscores is that gun ownership is not viewed in this environment as dependent upon possession of a firearm. Instead, it is an intrinsic identity trait, akin to ethnicity (see also Collins 2014; Lunceford 2015). Not coincidentally, the pale white skin of the baby in this image stands in contrast to the darker complexion of the alleged gun owner-cum-monster.

Figures 6 and 7 further reinforce the basic themes of this construed reality. In Figure 6, the laughing Buddha figure openly mocks the hysterical California gun laws, here taken to an exaggerated degree that includes ‘a flag with the word BANG on it’ as a regulatory requirement. Figure 7 returns to the notion of liberal duplicitousness, lampooning a ‘card carrying member of [gun control advocacy organization] One Million Moms’ who nonetheless values heavy domestic security, her son who claims unearned knowledge of weapons thanks to an isolated childhood experience and a hypocritical feminist who ‘says gun owners are compensating for small penises’ and yet enjoys playing first-person shooter (FPS) video games. Nowhere in this construed reality is there room for informed, sincere beliefs in the value and effectiveness of gun control.

Combining perceived and construed realities: What makes a hero?

As previously noted, the perceived and construed gun culture realities exist in constant tension with one another. A number of the meme images examined reflect this tension by embodying both simultaneously, serving as especially powerful expressions of the values and beliefs of activist gun owners.



Figure 5: Prior to being re-manipulated into an anti-gun control meme, this image was a work of video game fan art.



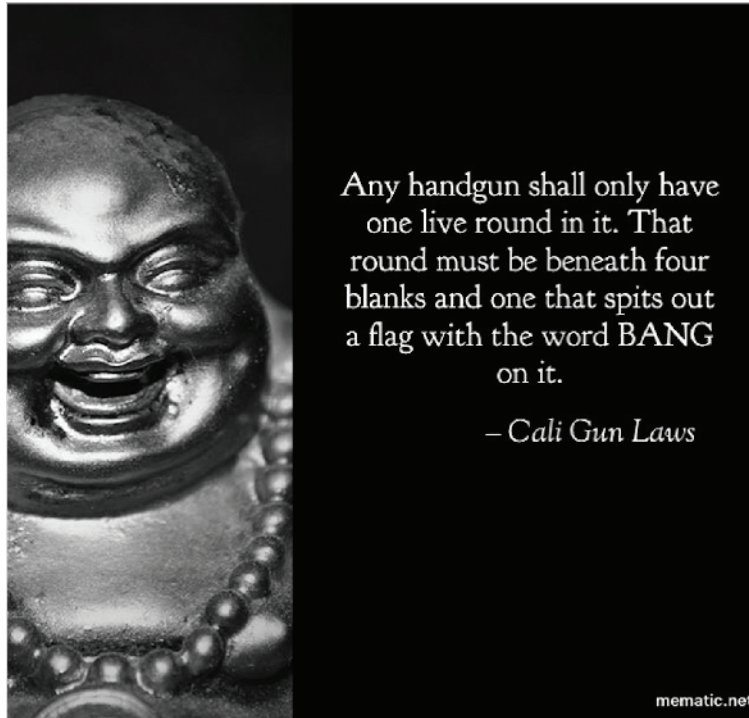


Figure 6: Mockery of gun regulations and the agitation that is assumed to underlie them is one tool for establishing social identity boundaries between Second Amendment supporters and their perceived nemeses.



Figure 7: A typology of 'grabbers' is intended to highlight their construed hypocrisy, insincerity, ignorance and weakness.

Questions of race frequently arise in discussions of gun rights, with activists on both ends of the issue spectrum eager to accuse the opposite side of racism (Winkler 2011). Figure 8 shows an iconic image of Martin Luther King, Jr., waving to crowds at the August 1963 March on Washington. This was the event at which he delivered his historic 'I Have A Dream' speech (History.com 2009). While it is factually true that King applied – and was refused – for a concealed carry permit in 1956, 'after his house was bombed but before he fully adopted Gandhian nonviolence' (Winkler 2011: 235), the meme is misleading. His application was denied not by the federal government, but by the police chief in Montgomery, Alabama, who had jurisdiction over gun permits (Winkler 2011: 290). Government regulations did not discriminate against King; the local authorities did.

However, this historical fact is used to reinforce the premise, central to perceived reality, that any licensing requirements at all is antithetical to freedom and interferes with the right of law-abiding citizens to defend themselves against the constant threat of attack. This image implies that, had he been allowed to arm himself as set forth in the Constitution, King might have escaped assassination.

As previously mentioned, gun culture discourse frequently frames gun ownership as an intrinsic identity trait rather than a consumer choice. Here, the parallel to race is made more directly, as gun control advocates are accused of being broadly discriminatory. We observed earlier that the construed reality posits liberals as ignorant, hypocritical and acting in bad faith in their demands for gun regulations. Combining the perceived and construed realities in a single image heightens the inherent tension between them and works to more effectively stigmatize the outgroup. Stigmatization is the process of ascribing qualities or 'marks' to an individual or population that may be 'visible or invisible, controllable or uncontrollable' related to any combination of behaviour, appearance or group membership. Major and O'Brien note that stigma 'does not reside in the person but in a social context' (2005: 395). In other words, a quality such as opposition to unfettered gun rights may be considered intrinsically neutral, but within the context of gun culture discourse it clearly bears a stigma.

That stigma is further reinforced in Figure 9, which contrasts construed liberal cowardice and unpreparedness with the perceived heroic bravery of gun owners.

Whereas Figure 8 appropriated the historical memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. as a martyr to the Second Amendment, Figure 9 draws on intertextual references to popular culture to offer another version of a hero: Val Kilmer as Doc Holliday.

The meme poses a scenario of a home invasion and illustrates two hypothetical responses. In the role of the gun owner, the bottom frame of the image macro is a still image from the movie *Tombstone* (Cosmatos, 1993), a close-up of Kilmer in the role of John Henry 'Doc' Holliday, friend and deputy of the legendary Arizona sheriff Wyatt Earp. The superimposed text repeats one of the best-known lines from the film, 'I'm your Huckleberry'. In the popular vernacular, since the movie's release this phrase has come to mean the equivalent of 'I'm your man', especially 'as a response to a threat or

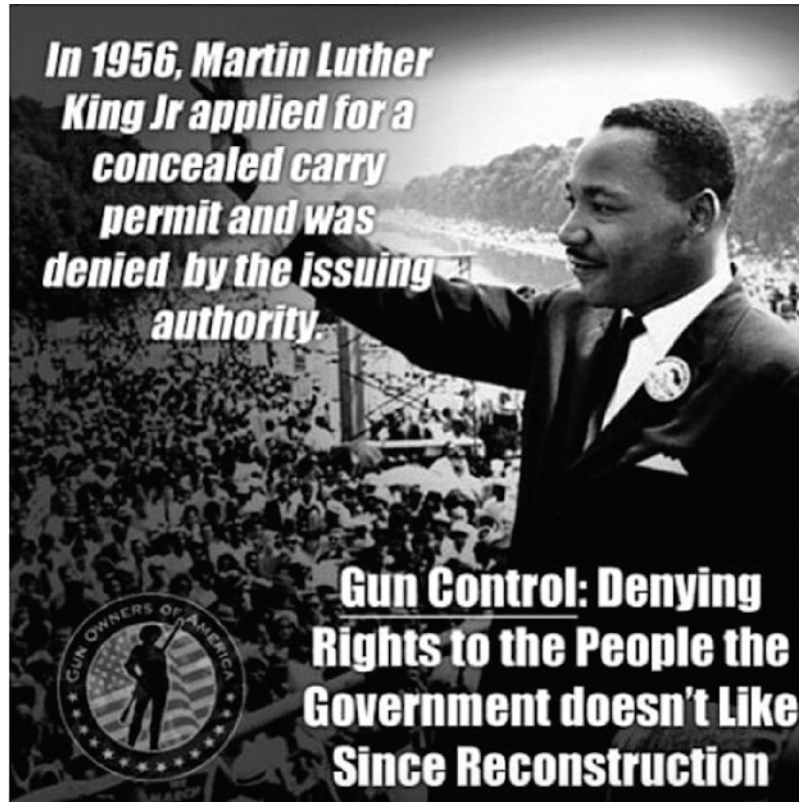


Figure 8: This iconic image of Martin Luther King, Jr. at the 1963 March on Washington is used here to stigmatize gun control advocates as racist and imply that government overregulation of weapons may have contributed to his death.



Figure 9: According to gun culture discourse, everyone should prepare for the likelihood of a home invasion. Failure to do so is a mark of naïveté and cowardice, in contrast to the calm (and masculine) heroics of a gun owner.

challenge' (Xcott 2006). The photo shows him looking confident and relaxed, with a slight smile. He appears to be standing in the doorway to a home or perhaps an interior room of a house.

The contrast with the upper frame of the image is stark. There we see the 'non gun owner' couple cowering in terror against a wall, their mouths agape to mirror the fish on the man's 'Carpe Diem' T-shirt. Both the man and the woman seem terrified, ostensibly by the home invader and the prospect of imminent violent death. In reality, the photo appears to originate from a hidden camera in a California haunted house attraction that snaps photographs of startled visitors (Greenring 2011).

Once again, we see the perceived and construed realities of American gun culture combined in a single image. Threats to family and property are a looming presence that demand constant courage and vigilance, traits that gun owners embody by definition. The framing suggests that those astute and brave enough to prepare for danger by purchasing and training with a firearm are inherently superior to 'libtards', too naïve or cowardly to adequately protect their home and loved ones. Evoking a Western movie figure is also a none-too-subtle appeal to traditional masculinity, nostalgia for a (fictional) world when gender roles were clearly defined and a pistol could be the final arbiter of the law. *Tombstone* is a movie that 'cleverly conflates myth, history, and fiction in one slippery package' (Dowell 1995: 7), a package that dovetails with the values of contemporary American gun culture.

Figures 10, 11 and 12 offer more examples of combined perceived and construed realities, with greater emphasis on the 'gun-grabbing' aspect. These memes reinforce the sense of perceived menace, which keeps Second Amendment activists in a state of alert to any attempt to curtail their constitutional right to bear arms and is a central feature of conservative political logics (Collins 2014; Cleen 2018). In doing so, they cast in the role of villains a set of figures ranging from a vague 'them' (Figure 10), to an implied tyrannical government (Figure 11), to the more specific 'gun control liberals' (Figure 12).

The light bulb meme in Figure 13 offers instead a play on a familiar joke format. In this version, 'gun-grabbers' do not bother to change the bulb; they pass unwarranted legislation and are too stupid to understand the negative consequences. This meme reaffirms the basic principle that access to guns is necessary to prevent people from getting hurt and gun control is an at best misguided, at worst deliberately harmful and unsafe attack on personal freedom.

Aspirational reality: Freedom through dominance

The memes that we have examined thus far have expressed perceptions and assumptions shared by Instagram users to gun culture hashtags. The dynamic between the perceived and construed poles has indirectly pointed to the third class of reality experienced by gun enthusiasts: the desirable realization of a world of unrestricted access to firearms. Figure 14 offers a glimpse of this aspirational reality.



Figure 10: The tautological nature of gun culture philosophy is apparent here in the need to establish a permanent threat.

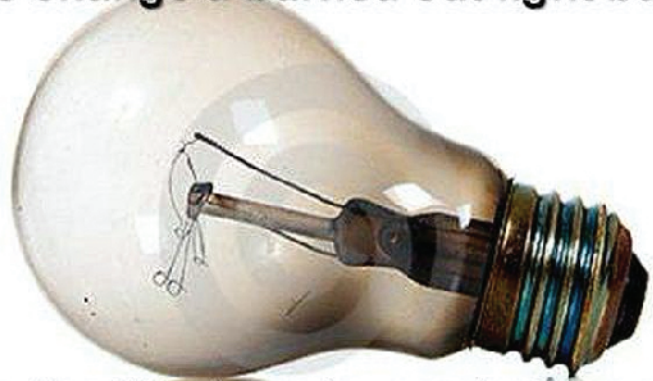


Figure 11: This meme rebuts a common objection to large magazines with an appeal to (imagined) history and scepticism toward government.

If I die in a mass shooting tomorrow, don't let gun control liberals use my death as an excuse to take away your guns.

Figure 12: Although repeatedly mocked, this meme emphasizes that liberals represent more than objects of ridicule: they also pose a threat. An underlying message is the acceptance of mass shootings as a fact of life.

How many gun-grabbers does it take to change a burned out light bulb?



None. They'll just pass laws against burned out bulbs and then wonder why it's still dark while people get hurt because they can't see.

Figure 13: This meme encapsulates several themes: the low intelligence of liberals, their over-reliance on poorly considered legislation and their willful disregard for the perceived dangers of an unarmed existence.



The meme is a play on the traditional peace symbol, combined with the design of a bullet rim. Most modern ammunition consists of a shell containing the bullet, gunpowder and primer. The base of the shell has a central percussion cap that, when struck, ignites the primer that in turn fires the bullet (Harris n.d.). The rim of the base is typically engraved with the name of the manufacturer and the calibre size of the ammunition.

In Figure 14, the area that would normally be occupied with the percussion cap has been replaced with a stylized version of the peace symbol, first popularized in 1958 to represent the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (Sinclair 2014). The notched design of the peace symbol here is reminiscent of the broken rifle symbol currently associated with war resistance and anti-militarism (San Antonio Peace Center n.d.; see Figure 15). In either case, the juxtaposition of an emblem of disarmament and an ingredient of armament is startling.

While it may seem discordant to present a peace symbol on a bullet, it is a dichotomy that represents the very essence of this aspirational reality. The phrasing specifies 'peace through superior firepower', a vision necessitating the existence of at least two entities: the dominant and the dominated. This is not a Utopian vision of universal mutual acceptance, but one of a world in which opponents are intimidated into submission. Collins (2014) has argued that the stated objective of Second Amendment activists can never truly be attained since it is based not on a real injustice or inequality that can be rectified, but on a state of perpetual demand: more freedom means more guns, and thus complete freedom – or peace – can only be achieved through universal arming. Indeed, this ambition reflects the refrain of National Rifle Association vice-president Wayne LaPierre that 'the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun' (Lichtblau and Rich 2012).

Once everyone is armed, however, those weapons must also be permitted everywhere, in any number and in any form, in a permanent arms race. This is the teleological aim of the culture that is reflected in all of these memes: If everyone in the future is adequately armed, then everyone will finally be safe, except for the libtards, that is, who will presumably be the ones with inferior firepower. Their stigmatized weakness and ignorance preclude them from enjoying the fruits of this future of domination.

Conclusion: Discourses of identity and power

The Instagram users who post memes to gun culture hashtags contribute towards reinforcing cultural values and towards establishing and maintaining social boundaries through these condensed communicative units, which 'spread on a micro basis, [but whose] impact is on the macro' (Shifman 2013: 365). On that macro level, the memes may be seen as operating through two overarching mechanisms: discourses of identity and discourses of power. While the traits are specific to the

1. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Broken_rifle.svg. Used under a Creative Commons license.



Figure 14: This image of a bullet cap embossed with a peace symbol and motto of domination expresses the aspirational reality of gun culture adherents.



Figure 15: The broken rifle symbol has been an anti-military emblem since the early twentieth century.¹

context of gun culture in this instance, similar mechanisms may be seen to operate through the dissemination of memes in other discursive environments.

From the perspective of identity, the memes establish criteria for group membership as either 'one of us' or as a 'libtard'. Gun ownership is defined not as a simple consumer decision, but as an identity marker that distinguishes people who have a 'realistic' view of the world and its threats, who value the home and family and are willing to do anything to protect them, and who self-select into this class of self-reliant individuals. At the same time, the liberal Other represents a threat in the form of attempts to enact regulations that would prevent gun owners from being able to defend themselves and their domains. This threat is posed through governmental institutions, viewed with suspicion as illegitimate sources of power denatured from the individual.

In the natural order, as they see it, gun owners do not need others to do the (inevitably necessary) protecting since they have the power and the means to do it themselves. They are by definition superior to those who do not own firearms. According to the discourse of power, more weapons, more ammunition, more shooting skill and more awareness of pervasive threats in society are what give gun owners the edge over 'weak' liberals. In a world that operates on the logic of 'do unto others before they do unto you', guns are what separate the winners from the losers. Those who fail to recognize and live by this basic principle are deemed worthy of derision.

Robert Glenn Howard cautions against ascribing too much weight to individual posts in online discussions among gun enthusiasts that might 'seem to foster a disturbing paranoia and even potentially some sort of violence' (2018: 133). It is also worth considering that many participants in such forums may privilege more extreme posts purely for their entertainment value; it is impossible to definitively discern nuanced attitudes on the sole basis of meme exchanges. However, the memes examined here were selected from among hundreds of images as representative of commonly expressed values and attitudes. The grooves of social distance between online Second Amendment activists and their gun-grabbing counterparts appear to be worn deep, produced and reproduced through a constant trickle of conservative visual rhetoric.

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Contributor details

Dawn R. Gilpin is an associate professor at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University. Her research explores complex social systems at the intersection of media, individual and collective identities, and politics. In recent years she has focused in particular on US gun culture, using social and semantic networks, narrative and discourse analysis, and other methods.

Contact: Walter Cronkite School of Journalism & Mass Communication, Arizona State University, 555 N. Central Ave. Ste. 301, Phoenix, AZ 85004, USA.

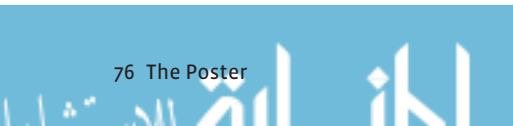
E-mail: dgilpin@asu.edu

Leslie-Jean Thornton is an associate professor at Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Her research focuses on how information is communicated, particularly visually and through the use of social media communities and platforms.

Contact: Walter Cronkite School of Journalism & Mass Communication, Arizona State University, 555 N. Central Ave. Ste. 301, Phoenix, AZ 85004, USA.

E-mail: leslie-jean.thornton@asu.edu

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